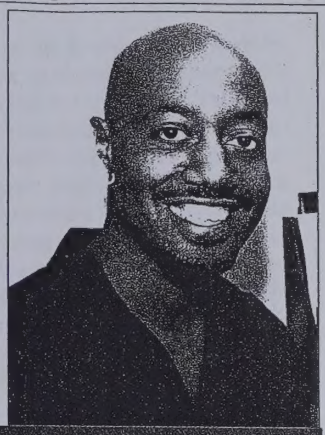
stand up & represent

we're Black, we're out, we're proud!

annual march signals new day for Black gay pride celebrations

words by Craig Washington



"When I saw that other folks were in tears, I knew it was all worth it. I knew why this march needs to continue to happen."

Dig, if you will, the picture. It began one year ago as one proud gay brother's dream. In the birthplace of that most renowned dreamer Martin Luther King Jr., a procession of Black gays and lesbians walked tall and jubilant in the second annual Stand Up and Represent Atlanta Black Gay Pride March on Labor Day. It was a crowning culmination capping a glorious weekend of affirmation, revelation, and reverie.

The event drew 400 people, more than twice as many participants as last year's premiere march. Rev. Antonio Jones of Unity Fellowship Church led the joyous crowd in prayer at the pre-march rally in the West End Mall. From there, they took to the streets drawing occasional applause and puzzled stares from onlookers with such chants as "we're Black, we're out, we're proud" and "who let the gays out." "It was like a pep rally and a celebration of freedom," said assistant march coordinator Nikki Young. Police officers flanked the front and back of this lively contingent to ensure protection. But aside from a lone minister who condemned the marchers, there was no opposition reported.

Political leaders and candidates in attendance included Congressman John Lewis and several Atlanta City Council members including Anne Fauver who is openly gay. Georgia State Senator Vincent Fort joined the post-march rally at West End Park.

"When I kept looking back from the frontline, I saw so many people," beamed march founder Anthony Antoine McWilliams. "When I saw that [assistant march coordinator] Shane Johnson and other folks were in tears, I knew it was all worth it. I knew why this march needs to continue to happen."

For McWilliams, a prominent HIV educator and performance artist, it was once again literally a dream come true. Last year he dreamt of a group of Black gay men marching out in the daylight. "When I woke up, I thought, 'oh, that would be cute,' but I didn't think it could be a reality." When a fellow activist challenged McWilliams to realize his vision, he gathered others including chief coordinator Jimmie Scott to plan the first known Black gay march in less than two months. Despite limited publicity and inclement weather, approximately 200 people marched in the rain from the steps of the State Capitol building to the Martin Luther King Center for Non-Violent Social Change.

The 2002 march organizers decided to place the march route entirely within a Black neighborhood, the historic West End district. "We wanted to bring it into an historically Black community that was instrumental to the civil rights struggle," said Michael Slaughter, board chair of In The Life Atlanta, the official Atlanta Black Gay Pride organization. "We also needed to build relationships instead of separating [ourselves] from our people." Youth organizer J. Lawrence Warren noted, "It's about time we represent in our own spaces. But it's not about where we do it, as long as we do it."

Warren also emphasized the significance of the march for LGBT youth: "The march gives them something to look up to. When we are part of a community that is proud of itself, it builds confidence." Warren and Young, both 23, called for increased inclusion of youth in future events. Young also noted segregation between men and women throughout the weekend. "I saw small cliques of women among a slew of men. If you look at the overall participation, it's a male-heavy event."

Weeks before the event, the planning committee encountered some local resistance to the post-march rally convening in West End Park. The West End Neighborhood Planning Unit (N.P.U.) initially declined the committee's application. When the decision was challenged by a member, the NPU overturned the vote and approved the rally. Several march organizers speculated that the lukewarm reception may not have been entirely homophobic, since they had not established any prior presence in the West End. "This was a lesson," McWilliams observed. "We can make a difference, and there is acceptance for us in our community."

The march concluded a five-day series of Pride events coordinated by In The Life Atlanta. Most of the activities were held at the Renaissance Waverly, the official host hotel. The weekend commenced with a rousing candlelight vigil led by Pastor YaQar of Alpha and Omega AIDS Foundation. The opening reception featured spoken word and African dance performances. Keynote speaker Mayor Shirley Franklin, Atlanta's first African American female mayor, also became the first Atlanta mayor to address Black Gay Pride. "The progress you have made is wonderful, and I hope we can continue to make progress in the area of gay rights together," she said. The following day included a generous selection of workshops, panel discussions, and a health fair. On the day before the march, 50 attendants flocked to a worship service at the hotel, which was followed by a Pride brunch at the Atlanta Gay and Lesbian Center. Slaughter deemed this year's Pride an overall success: "This event allowed African-American LGBT people to come together and celebrate our uniqueness."

At one of the weekend's high points, Congressman Lewis drew a standing ovation for his remarks at a discussion about political involvement. "Things have changed, and its because we got in the way and we agitated. Keep getting in the way and agitating on Black Gay Pride weekend and every day."

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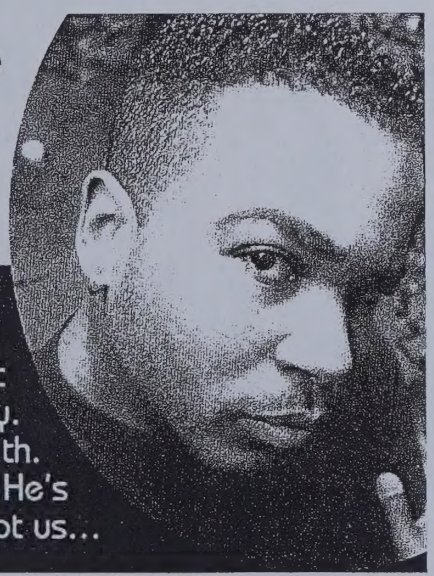

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